

CONGRESSMAN MARK POCAN (WI-02) TESTIMONY

**HOUSE EDUCATION & WORKFORCE SUBCOMMITTEE ON EARLY
CHILDHOOD, ELEMENTARY, AND SECONDARY EDUCATION**

**HEARING ON “SCHOOL CHOICE: EXPANDING EDUCATIONAL
FREEDOM FOR ALL”**

April 18, 2023

Chairman Bean and Ranking Member Bonamici,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before today’s subcommittee hearing.

The title of today’s hearing, “School Choice: Expanding Educational Freedom for All” is particularly ironic, because anyone who has looked at the data on school choice, in particular private school vouchers, knows that these programs drain resources away from our public schools – which serve the vast majority of students – in order to fund private and religious schools which aren’t held to the same educational standards nor are subject to many of the anti-discrimination laws that protect LGBTQ+ students, students with disabilities, students of color, and other vulnerable groups¹. Voucher programs have nothing to do with educational freedom for all and would more accurately be described as a selective tax benefit for the wealthiest families.

My home state of Wisconsin’s own voucher program is a prime example of how vouchers give tax breaks to parents who already send their kids to private schools, defund the public education system, and are an abject failure when it comes to improving education outcomes for kids.

Vouchers Fund Students Already Attending Private School, Not Low-Income Kids

First, let’s be clear on who these programs support. Voucher programs overwhelmingly subsidize kids who were already in private schools before taxpayers picked up the tab. In Wisconsin, as well as states like Missouri², more

¹ https://pfps.org/assets/uploads/SPLC_ELC_PFPS_2023Report_Final.pdf pfps report page 7

² https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/education/missouri-lawmakers-look-to-expand-tax-credit-voucher-program-mostly-serving-religious-schools/article_ef0b7afb-6805-586b-a668-67b2d10ecd64.html

than 70-80 percent of vouchers go to kids already in private school. Wisconsin's program started with **511 students** in the 2013-14 school year and now has an enrollment of **17,079 students**. Every year, Wisconsin's voucher program has consistently enrolled more students from private schools than from public schools.

This makes no sense. When I talk to teachers, principals, and parents in my district, they tell me how desperately they need more resources to hire mental health personnel, provide afterschool programming, and expand their Career and Technical Education offerings. Reducing what little resources they have to subsidize kids attending private schools that their parents can already afford is not about education, it's about tax breaks.

Vouchers Don't Save Taxpayer Dollars and Drain Funds from Public Schools

Additionally, these programs do not save taxpayer dollars. The costs of Wisconsin's statewide voucher program have grown from just over \$3 million in 2013-14 to a whopping **\$76 million** this year³. According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, in 2019-20 local property taxpayers spent over **\$100 million just that year** on our voucher programs.

Wisconsin is now effectively funding two separate school systems, one public and one private, entirely out of the limited pot of state education funds. This puts a heavy financial burden on public schools, and on local taxpayers who have been forced to raise their own taxes to foot the bill. In fact, Wisconsin taxpayers were forced to raise \$21 million to pay for private school vouchers in 2015-16, and \$140 million in 2020-21⁴.

My colleagues on the other side of the aisle often talk about their support for rural communities, but voucher programs hit rural schools particularly hard and put these very communities at risk. In my district, rural schools in small towns like Darlington and Juda serve as more than just a space to educate students – they are major employers and cultural institutions at the very center of small-town life. Studies show that when a rural school closes, the surrounding town experiences a sharp decrease in population growth⁵. Rural communities in my district and across the country can't afford to lose their public schools because of unaccountable voucher programs.

³ https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/parental-education-options/Choice/Data_and_Reports/2020-21/2020-21_wpcp_payment_history.pdf

⁴ <https://wisconsinexaminer.com/2021/05/07/tracking-the-growing-cost-to-taxpayers-of-private-school-vouchers/>

⁵ <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/when-schools-close-in-rural-communities/2017/08>

Vouchers Don't Improve Academic Achievement

These programs don't even improve academic achievement for the students that participate.

A 2011 study shows that students in Milwaukee using vouchers to attend private schools perform no better on standardized tests than their public school counterparts⁶. A 2017 study also found that the Milwaukee voucher program had no effect on students' likelihood of graduating college⁷. There is similar data for programs in Louisiana⁸, Ohio⁹, and Indiana¹⁰.

Many of these voucher schools also fail and shut down with little warning, abruptly forcing students to find a new school and without returning a dime of the public funding that went to the voucher school. In fact, one study shows that 41 percent of all private voucher schools operating in Milwaukee between 1991 and 2015 failed¹¹.

The schools that do manage to stay open show abysmal retention rates. In Wisconsin, about 20 percent of kids left their voucher school every year and most went into a public school¹². These tended to be the lowest scoring kids, and kids of color—and they tended to leave the newest pop-up schools. Researchers also found that their academic outcomes **improved** once they landed in their public schools¹³.

Voucher Schools Lack Accountability and Oversight

Finally, as I listen to my colleagues who love to talk about accountability for federal spending, it's worth noting that these "school choice" programs have zero accountability to taxpayers.

When Wisconsin first started the voucher program, the standards were incredibly loose. Even so, the state still paid \$139 million over a 10 year period to schools that were ultimately barred from the program for failing to meet requirements¹⁴.

⁶ <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED530066.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/do-voucher-students-attain-higher-levels-education>

⁸ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3376230

⁹ <https://fordhaminstitute.org/ohio/research/evaluation-ohios-edchoice-scholarship-program-selection-competition-and-performance>

¹⁰

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332355793_Voucher_Pathways_and_Student_Achievement_in_Indiana's_Choice_Scholarship_Program

¹¹ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/psj.12164>

¹² <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.3102/0002831211424313>

¹³ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.3102/0162373712461852>

¹⁴ <https://www.postcrescent.com/story/news/local/2014/10/12/wisconsin-millions-failed-voucher-schools/17152907/>

There was a school that used their government funds to lease Cadillacs¹⁵. Another school that received funds was run by someone who said they could read a book by simply placing their hand on it.

While eventually the standards improved, voucher schools are not subject to the same requirements and oversight as public schools, meaning there is little to protect taxpayers from these types of abuses given the wide range of laws that currently exist.

Conclusion

Public funds belong in public schools, which serve all students, regardless of whether they have special needs or their economic situation. We already know that voucher programs have failed to achieve their stated goals. These programs lack basic oversight measures, fund discrimination, and fail to improve academic achievement for the students that participate. There is only so much taxpayer funding to go around. If more is spent on voucher expansion, there will be less funding available for the 850,000 children attending Wisconsin public schools. That's true for every community across the country.

Our nation's public schools are already resource-starved, struggling to fund livable salaries for teachers, pay for basic infrastructure upgrades, or maintain manageable classroom sizes. We should be investing public, taxpayer dollars into the schools that educate the vast majority of our nation's students, not expanding failed policies to further erode these critical public institutions.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today, and I yield back.

¹⁵ <https://www.fox6now.com/news/pastor-charged-with-stealing-government-funds-from-school>